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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 001463

SIPDIS

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BEIJING PASS TO CHENGDU

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [PHUM](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: KACHIN STATE: AN UNEASY "PEACE"

REF: A. 02 RANGOON 1684

[B](#). 02 RANGOON 1585

[C](#). 02 RANGOON 1571

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.5 (B,D)

[1](#). (C) Summary: An Embassy trip to Burma's Kachin State secured additional support for our WWII remains recovery operations, but also revealed that the Government's ten-year old cease-fire agreement with the region's former insurgents masks deep suspicion of the SPDC and an active desire for self autonomy. Drug use and HIV/AIDS are on the rise in Kachin State, but there are few signs of GOB attention to the development of Burma's northernmost region and the regime's primary focus is on securing a full surrender of the independence movement. Much to the chagrin of the SPDC, the local population retains a close affinity for the United States, a legacy of American missionaries and close cooperation between Kachin Rangers and U.S. soldiers during WWII. End Summary.

Kachin State: A Remote Mixing Pot

[2](#). (SBU) The DCM and the Defense Attache (DATT), joined by several other Embassy officers, traveled on October 1-3 to Kachin State, Burma's northernmost territory, wedged between China and India. The main objective of the mission was to secure additional support for ongoing operations to recover the remains of World War II servicemen, but the trip also afforded Emboffs an opportunity to meet with a broad range of groups and ethnic minorities who reside in a region of Burma rich with a history of conflict and intrigue.

[3](#). (U) Most natives of Kachin State are of Tibeto-Burman origin and many of the local ethnic groups, as a result of 19th and early 20th century American missionaries, are nominally Christian. However, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and animist practices are also influential and the Kachin State capital city of Myitkyina is a mixing pot of Burma's many ethnic and religious groups. Until the early 1990s, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and its military arm, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), controlled most of the state. The Burmese regime reached a cease-fire agreement in 1993 with the KIA, ending an active insurgency. However, until just a couple of years ago the SPDC continued to treat Kachin State as a sensitive area and restricted the movement of foreigners and many Burmese. The SPDC continues to designate some remote areas of Kachin State as off limits to U.S. Embassy personnel, including the jade-mining center of Hpakan.

Cooperation for Remains Recovery

[4](#). (U) Thousands of U.S. soldiers were killed along the "Burma Road" in Kachin State during WWII, aiding efforts to repel the Japanese invasion of Burma and supplying the China front with flights over "The Hump." The remains of several hundred airmen are missing in Kachin State and the Department of Defense and the U.S. Embassy began recovery efforts in [2002](#). U.S.-trained Kachin Rangers played an important combat and intelligence role in defeating the Japanese in the region and local sentiment remains overwhelmingly pro-American, even to this day.

[5](#). (C) In Myitkyina, the Embassy delegation met with SPDC Deputy Northern Commander, Brigadier General San Htun, to discuss plans for an upcoming investigative mission and a follow-on site excavation planned for February 2004. BG San Htun informed the DCM and DATT that he was under strict instructions from his commanding officers in Rangoon to support fully the humanitarian/military operation, and added that he intended to provide complete security for all U.S. personnel participating in recovery efforts. Regional military intelligence chief, Lt Col Tin Aung Gyi, said he was concerned that some of the proposed excavation sites were remote and inaccessible by helicopter, observing that snakes could pose problems for the American recovery teams (Note: LtC Tin Aung Gyi, speaking in Burmese, clarified to the Deputy Commander that he had referred to the reptile, not the "other kind of snakes," a thinly veiled reference to KIA

insurgents. End note.)

#### The Baptists

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16. (SBU) Also in Myitkyina, the Embassy delegation held a lengthy meeting with the leadership of the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC), a powerful association of church groups founded in 1910 by American Baptist missionaries. With over 300,000 members, the KBC plays an important role in Kachin politics and social development (former Secretary General Rev. Saboi Jum helped broker the 1993 cease-fire agreement).

17. (C) KBC leaders were pessimistic about the state of affairs in Kachin State, criticizing the SPDC for morally corrupt governance and chastising the KIO for shady practices. According to the KBC leaders, Kachin State is experiencing a disturbing growth in prostitution, opium cultivation and trafficking, and HIV/AIDS. KBC youth leaders claimed that up to 60 percent of male teenagers in the state had used heroin or amphetamines, and that many young Kachin women were entering the sex industry in Rangoon or Thailand. As a result, the KBC remains closely engaged in the provision of basic services throughout the State.

18. (C) The KBC leadership reserved its harshest criticism for human rights abuses attributed to the SPDC. They claimed that most involuntary portering for military troops had ended with the 1993 cease-fire agreement, but said the regime continued to force local populations to provide labor for infrastructure projects and to participate in the SPDC's new people's militia. The leaders also noted that government authorities had forced over 30,000 local residents, including all students and civil servants, to attend recent mass rallies in support of PM Khin Nyunt's road map for democracy.

19. (C) According to the KBC leaders, NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi's visit to Kachin State in May had many repercussions for local party members and supporters. Military intelligence agents arrested NLD partisans and the USDA intimidated locals, threatening punishment for those who supported the NLD delegation or even stood on the streets to observe ASSK's passing convoy. The wife of a homeowner who lodged ASSK in Myitkyina was arrested shortly after the visit and, over five months later, remains in detention. USDA officials paid local unemployed youth and thugs with cash and booze to harass the NLD convoy and hit vehicles with sticks, and one bystander who saluted ASSK was severely beaten.

#### The Catholics

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10. (C) Catholic Church leaders of the diocese of Myitkyina hosted the Embassy delegation and, much like the Baptist leadership, expressed deep concern over dramatic increases in the use of illicit drugs and rising HIV/AIDS infection rates throughout Kachin State. Senior priests, who represent a state-wide congregation of over 48 priests and 100,000 active Catholics, were sharply critical of the SPDC. They expressed embarrassment, as one priest put it, "for appearing to be deaf and dumb shepherds" unable to lead their people out from under the heavy rule of an authoritarian regime.

11. (C) In a formal speech to the U.S. delegation, a senior priest spoke on behalf of archdiocese Bishop Francis Tang, who was out of the country during our visit. The speech, risky by Burmese standards in its political overtones, recalled cooperation between Americans and the "temperamentally war-like" Kachins to free the region from Japanese occupation. The priest said that the Kachin people have a great desire and drive for self-autonomy, and their support for allied troops during WWII was symbolic of their ongoing aspirations for freedom. Privately, the priests and nuns who met with us were even more fiery in their political views, with several inquiring as to when the U.S. would send troops into Burma to oust the SPDC.

#### Big Brother is Watching

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12. (C) The day after our meeting with the Catholic leaders, military intelligence (MI) agents descended on the parish compound and interrogated the priests and nuns about their hosting of the Embassy delegation. Indeed, MI maintained a visible presence during our three days in Kachin State, tailing our small motorcade, staking out our hotel, pressing all of our interlocutors for details on our meetings, and, in several cases, discouraging local organizations from meeting with us altogether. The KIO and a local OSS 101 veterans group both scrapped scheduled meetings with us due to heavy-handed pressure by MI officers.

13. (C) Our visit to Myitkyina also included meetings with several international and local NGOs, including MSF-Holland (AZD), Metta Development Foundation, and the Shalom Foundation (the latter two created by Rev. Saboi Jum). While

these organizations are focused on separate priorities--such as health, agriculture, and conflict resolution--we heard a common theme about the resolve of the Kachin people to embark on self-help initiatives in the absence of resources from the SPDC. While the NGOs muted their criticism of the regime, it was evident from our visit that the SPDC has done little since the cease-fire agreement to improve basic needs in Kachin State.

North of North  
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14. (C) The trip to Kachin State concluded with a half-day visit to Putao, a former British military post (Ft. Hertz) and Burma's northernmost town. According to DAO records, this was the first visit to Putao by a U.S. military aircraft in at least 20 years. The SPDC only recently opened Putao to foreign visitors and, with the town located in a pristine Himalayan zone, is beginning to encourage ecotourism in the region. Our stay was too short to talk politics with the locals, but we were struck by the diversity of hill tribes and other ethnic groups, each with their own distinct housing architecture. Although former dictator Ne Win expelled foreign missionaries from Burma in the 1960s, American Baptist and Assembly of God missionaries had also extended their reach to Putao and one of their legacies is thriving citrus fruit production.

Comment: Jade for Bridges  
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15. (C) The SPDC continues to support our joint humanitarian remains recovery operations, but the regime is keen to limit U.S. influence in Kachin State over fears of rekindling an active insurgency. The upcoming 10th anniversary of the cease-fire agreement between the GOB and the KIA, coming in close proximity to the KIO's revolutionary day on February 5, provides the SPDC with a pretext to seek a full surrender of the Kachin independence movement. Although the Kachin people welcome the cessation of open hostilities, a desire for self autonomy remains strong and there is widespread disappointment that the cease-fire has not resulted in greater prosperity and government assistance in such sectors as health and education. To the contrary, the SPDC is closely involved in the extraction of wealth from the State's natural resources such as timber and precious stones, primarily gold and the world's highest quality jade, which enriches only a select few locals. In return, the SPDC has delivered little more than a few token infrastructure projects.  
Martinez